

Although the western study of communism before 1989 often went by the name "Sovietology", those who practised it came to appreciate what we here already knew: beneath the rigid ideological uniformity imposed by Moscow, the countries of the Eastern Bloc did not constitute a seamless monolith. The form and severity of these regimes varied both across space, as between Hungary and Poland, and across time, as in Czechoslovakia before and after 1968. While some of these variations could be attributed to political leadership and other such discrete factors, much was also due to the region's disparate political cultures.

Although the Communist system collapsed, discrete political cultures have prevailed. As before, they continue to give a distinctive shape to the emerging institutions and practices of the post-communist democracies. Perhaps the most telling evidence of the enduring influence of political culture has been the dissolution of the three communist federations into separate nation-states. Indeed, following the current development it is sometimes hard to imagine that Slovenia and Serbia, Estonia and Belarus, and Slovakia and the Czech Republic once belonged to common political units.

As ultimate political authority now rests with the voters and not with commissars, it is quite natural that the politics of the post-communist democracies should increasingly reflect each country's history, tradition, religion and recent political development.

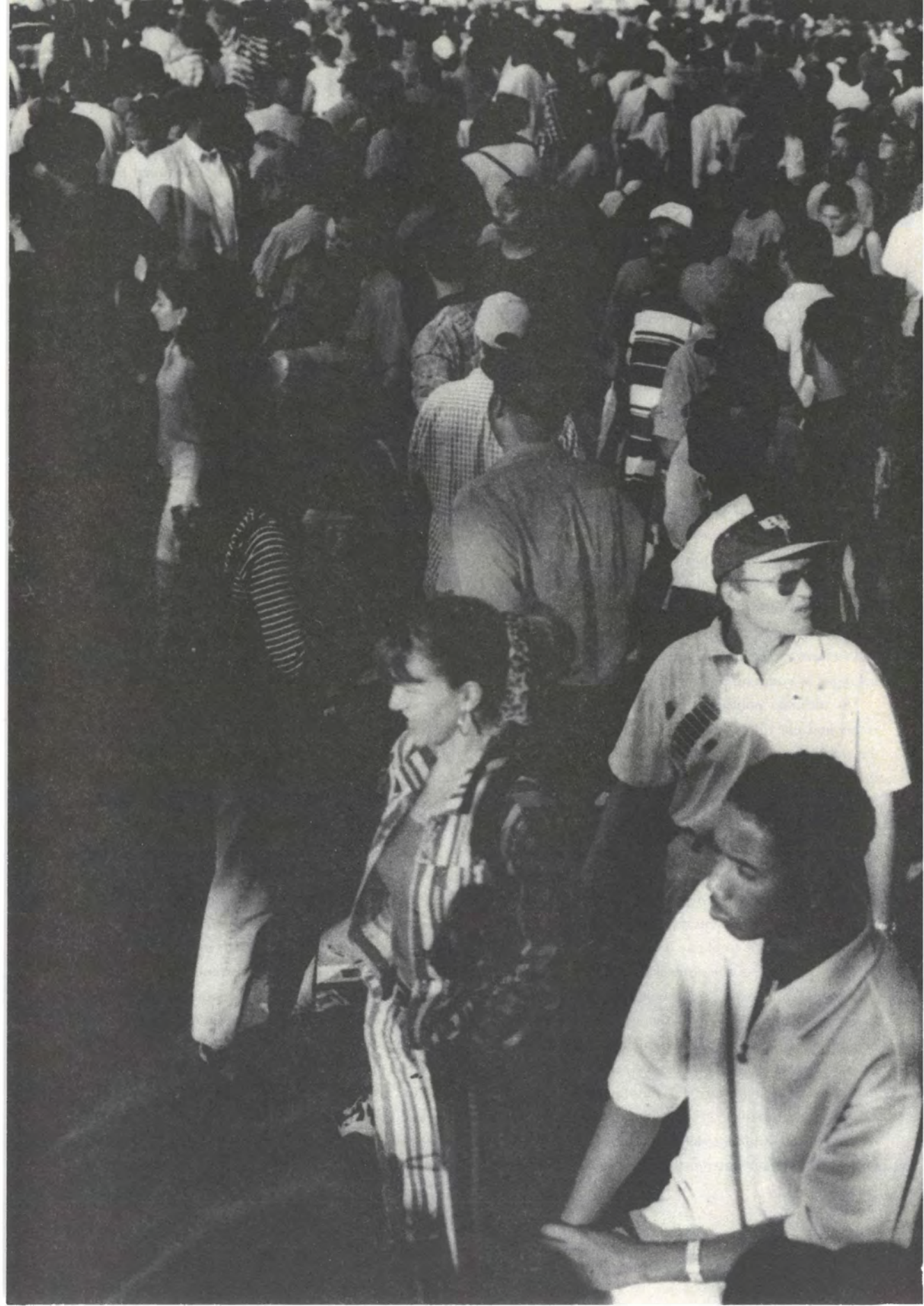
As we build our democratic societies, we are free to govern ourselves, to participate in the political process, to choose our government as we judge appropriate. There is no longer anything to deny us this choice. Yet, there is nothing to prevent us from choosing badly. And there is no one else to blame if we do.

This paradox is the central theme of *The Rise of Illiberal Democracies*, an article written by Fareed Zakaria, editor-in-chief of the influential journal, *Foreign Affairs*. It is an article which has provoked considerable international discussion and which, we believe, has great relevance for Slovakia today. Zakaria stresses the difference between liberalism and democracy, two terms which today are often taken together but which in fact have distinct histories and distinct

meanings. His characterization of the difference is aptly captured by his observation that, "constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power, democracy about its accumulation and use." Zakaria draws this distinction in order to make a broader observation about contemporary political life. "Today", he says, "the two strands of liberal-democracy, interwoven in the western political fabric, are coming apart in the rest of the world." In a growing number of countries, "democracy is flourishing, constitutional-liberalism is not." Increasingly, free and competitive elections are producing a new breed of illiberal democracies.

Our readers might well ask why it is that we have decided to re-print this article and to devote the upcoming issue's Disputation to its ideas, particularly since the principled aim of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT** has been to review social science literature while leaving current politics to the side. The reason is to be found in the current condition of Slovak politics. Division and polarization have deepened to such a degree that Slovak society today is in crisis. The stakes are high. And we stand at a crucial crossroads. For better or for worse, Slovak citizens have a fateful and unavoidable political choice to make. Either we choose an illiberal status quo which offers increasingly unsustainable populist promises, the continued erosion of civic freedoms, and the international isolation of Slovakia, or we choose an alternative leadership which is firmly committed to governing Slovakia according to liberal-democratic principles, to protecting the rights of Slovak citizens, and to bringing Slovakia the political, economic, and security benefits of full membership in the Euro-Atlantic community.

If Slovakia were a secure liberal-democracy, one could argue, and rightly so, that individual citizens should be free to decide to what extent they want to engage and be engaged in political matters. But Slovakia has not yet attained this status. And in our current state of profound polarization, there simply is no space left for citizens to safely maintain a neutral position. In the short run, this polarization is suffocating our development and is diverting our precious energies away from more pressing social and economic issues. In the long run, however, this polarization may yet prove beneficial:



for it offers the citizens of Slovakia an opportunity to take charge of themselves and determine their own political future.

This opportunity is clearly unprecedented. Our national survival is no longer in question and our status as an independent and self-determining nation-state is secure. However, we must now engage a new challenge: the challenge of citizens freely deciding their own political destiny. It may appear ironic to some, but the possibility of meeting this challenge successfully is perhaps much greater now, in our independent Slovakia, than it was in the past. As long as we remained a constituent part of Czechoslovakia, all of our political aspirations were subordinate to the overriding question of Slovak-Czech relations. Under such conditions, we Slovaks could assert our nationhood while avoiding the hard questions of just what kind of nation, what kind of polity, and what kind of life we citizens were striving to achieve. We can avoid this self-examination no longer. Our true test as a democratic community of citizens has arrived.

If, in the upcoming parliamentary elections in September, we should pass this test, if we should succeed in overcoming this polarization and electing a truly liberal-democratic government, it would represent a historical watershed for Slovakia. Arguably, it would constitute a victory of even greater democratic consequence than any of the key formative events in Slovak history: the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, the Prague Spring of 1968, or the fall of communism in 1989. As important as these events have been to Slovakia's political and national development, all were initiated either by a minority of Slovak citizens (1944) or by outside actors (1918, 1968, and 1989). Only subsequently were these events, and the creative possibilities they unleashed, appropriated and supported by broad sectors of Slovak society. In contrast, a victory of liberal-democracy in September would belong to us alone. It would be a victory against our own habit of passivity - leitmotif of our past existence.

As the institutional and legal foundation of the *Rechtsstaat* is already in place, such a victory would not mean, nor would it require, any revolutionary "new beginning". Instead, in freely choosing a specifically liberal-democracy, we would be fulfilling the promise of a society in which the majority of citizens refuses to be satisfied with a government that offers only the bare minimum of survival and a pale imitation of democratic life and who instead insist upon a government which is committed, in both word and deed, to decency, fairness, and respect for the sovereignty of citizens.

Finally, securing a liberal-democratic government in September would not only relieve Slovak society of the political polarization, which today so debilitates and exhausts us, it would also permit the depoliticisation of everyday life and let us get on with our normal business as normal citizens. Among other things, it would allow us to deal with public issues such as employment, education, health, and the environment - issues which are far more relevant and pressing for the majority of average citizens, but for which we have had, until now, hardly the time, space or liberty to address. For Slovak society today, the role of the Catholic Church in our society, its relationship to religious studies and the nature and influence of the mass media in a technological, global era, are also of crucial importance. For this reason, our examination of illiberal democracy is followed in this issue of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT** by reviews of the works of the Romanian philosopher of religion, Mircea Eliade, and the Canadian media-theorist, Marshall McLuhan.

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